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ABSTRACT

Presented here is a study of how principals contributed to successful court-ordered desegregation. Five principals in urban, elementary schools who were named by district administrators as those doing an especially effective job were interviewed. The following perceptions were revealed as the result of an analysis of the interviews: (1) it is important to meet with parents, students and staff before the beginning of the new school year; (2) parental involvement is essential to the success of school desegregation; (3) building up student and staff morale plays an important role in a successful first year of desegregation; (4) principals in successful schools are highly visible and accessible to students and staff; (5) consistent enforcement of school policy must begin with the first day of school; and (6) input from administrators, parents, and teachers is actively sought by successful principals. (JCD)

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On Implementing Court-Ordered School Desegregation: What Successful Elementary Principals Do

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ON IMPLEMENTING COURT-ORDERED SCHOOL DESEGREGATION:
WHAT SUCCESSFUL ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS DO

Increasing interest in educational effectiveness during the late 1960's and early 1970's gave rise to a large number of research studies relating the outcomes of schooling to a vast array of school characteristics, as well as home and family variables. This "input-output" approach has been supplemented recently by research designs which examine more closely the specific processes within schools which may be related to student achievement and attitudes (e.g., Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Squires, 1980).

The idea that principals play a central role in school effectiveness is intuitively appealing and has recently received empirical support (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Ellett & Walberg, 1979; Wellisch et al., 1978). However, although such studies suggest that principal leadership is linked to overall school effectiveness, they provide little concrete information about specific administrative behaviors which are related to various school outcomes. Moreover, none of these studies address what some (e.g., Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980) see as a crucial aspect of the contemporary principalship: the management of organizational change and conflict.

Dramatic examples of the type of extreme organizational change and conflict which often confront today's principal can be found in school districts which are ordered to begin a process of desegregation. This is an emotionally "charged" process which involves multiple and conflicting pressures and which can make the normally difficult task of creating an effective learning environment even more difficult. It may also heighten the effects of any particular approach to the principalship. Moreover, the problems generated by this type of social change make it vastly different from the typical range of organizational change phenomena (Small, 1974).

Unfortunately, the vast bulk of the school desegregation literature has been much more concerned with the outcomes of desegregation than with the processes which influence those outcomes (Schofield, 1978; St. John, 1975). There have been a few exceptions to this general trend. For example, in analyzing an impressive array of data from achievement tests, questionnaires, and interviews in nearly 200 schools, Forehand et al. (1976) singled out the principal as the person whose actions most influence race relations and academic achievement in desegregated schools. At the other end of the methodological spectrum is an ethnographic study of the functioning of two principals in a southern desegregated school (Noblitt, 1979).

Thus, there is some support for the idea that the principal can be influential in determining how effectively desegregation is implemented. What is needed is information on how the principal can exercise that influence (Chessler, Crowfoot, & Bryant, 1978). The present research was designed to address that need.

Methods

This study was conducted during the first year of court-ordered desegregation in an urban school district having an enrollment of approximately 54,000 students. Due to the court order, approximately 20,000 students were reassigned (usually by being "bussed") to a different school for the year. For practical reasons, the scope of the study was limited to especially effective principals at the elementary level. It was felt that identification of especially poor or ineffective principals was politically unwise during the first year of a massive desegregation effort. In addition, more constructive information seemed likely from the effective principals. Nevertheless, the technique that was used resulted in some methodological problems that are discussed later in more detail.

In the Spring of 1981, 21 elementary instructional administrators in the District were asked to think about and later to nominate a principal or school that seemed to be doing an especially effective and smooth job of implementing desegregation. No criteria for what constituted a "success story" were specified, but reasons for each nomination were sought during an interview with each administrator.

The nominated schools were then rank-ordered in terms of how frequently they were mentioned. The principals of the five most frequently mentioned schools were then interviewed in a somewhat open-ended interview so that the principals could talk about whatever they thought relevant. However, each principal was also asked the following specific questions:

1. How has your job changed this year as a function of desegregation?

2. When did you begin your advance planning, and what specifically did it involve?

3. What things have you done to keep your school functioning smoothly this year?

4. Of all the things you've done this year, what can you identify as the key(s) to your success?

5. If you had to do it all over again, what things would you do differently?

6. What are you doing now to prepare for the future, and what can the District do to help you?

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Four were conducted in the principals' offices; the fifth was conducted in a conference room outside the principal's office. The same person conducted all five interviews and took notes on each.

Analyses and Results

In analyzing the content of the interviews, one focus was on identifying common themes or issues discussed by all or most of the principals. Another focus was on specific practices described by each principal. Briefly:

I. IN PREPARING FOR DESEGREGATION, IT IS IMPORTANT FOR THE STUDENTS, STAFF, AND PARENTS INVOLVED TO MEET EACH OTHER BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS.

As it turned out, each of the interviewees was the principal of an elementary school which had been reorganized for the 1980-81 school year. Thus, each principal began the year with a substantial number of students and staff who were new to the school. These principals all stressed the importance of providing opportunities for "new" and "old" students, staff, and parents to get to know each other before the school year actually began. In the words of one principal, "I was very concerned about the 'we-they' thing developing." Some of the specific practices mentioned by various principals included the following:

"I called all my teachers over the summer and talked with each one briefly. Then, I put out a summer newsletter with a personal tidbit about each one in it."

"We set up pen pals between the two schools during the spring before busing began."

"As soon as we knew who we were paired with, we began sending bulletins and weekly newsletters back and forth between schools."

"We had a very successful family picnic at the beginning of the year."

"We had a staff development meeting for both faculties in February. We were here in the morning for a brunch, and then we went over there for the afternoon."

II. SUCCESSFUL DESEGREGATION REQUIRES THAT CONSIDERABLE TIME BE SPENT ADDRESSING PARENTS' CONCERNS AND ENCOURAGING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES.

All of the interviewed principals spoke of the importance of being sensitive to parents' feelings and responsive to their questions. As one put it, "My job is to assure parents that the system really does listen to them and is genuinely concerned about them." In describing a meeting he had with his paired school's PTA, another principal said, "I didn't talk about the details of what would be happening in school...I tried to address their concerns about their children. 'Will my child

get the special help he needs? Will my children be challenged by school?'" A third principal stressed that, "When parents call me about a problem I always deal with it immediately. I always get right back to them and convince them they've done the right thing by calling me."

However, beyond being merely sympathetic listeners and responsive to parents' concerns, the principals also stressed the importance of enlisting and encouraging active parental involvement in school activities. One principal explained that, "We're shooting for active, interested parents because parents need to have a visual image of the school and the teacher and so on if they're going to buy into it."

One principal showed the interviewer a "parent handbook" which had been sent to each parent. This included, among other things, descriptions of various opportunities for parental involvement in school activities (e.g., a reading club, school trips, the student newspaper, a cultural arts group, etc.) as well as a "volunteer registration form."

III. BUILDING UP STAFF AND STUDENT MORALE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN A SUCCESSFUL FIRST YEAR OF DESEGREGATION.

School morale was of major importance to all of the interviewed principals. Asked how the job had changed this year, one principal answered, "This year, I spend more time on morale and boosting spirits."

"The last Friday of each month was Spirit Day, when the students and teachers were encouraged to wear their school T-shirt."

"If students go by the school rules and the honor code, they get an honor button."

"I'll write a little personal note to a teacher who has done something good."

"I have a go-to-lunch-with-a-friend program. If two teachers want to get out of the building for lunch together, they just let me know in advance, and my helping teacher and I will take their classes."

"We have a reward system in the cafeteria where each class is evaluated on their behavior. Classes compete for monthly awards (ribbons, food surprises, etc.)."

IV. PRINCIPALS IN SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS ARE HIGHLY VISIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE TO STUDENTS AND STAFF.

All the principals talked about spending a lot of time in the hallways and classrooms of their schools. Most said they were in every classroom at least once a day.

One principal pointed out that "it's time-consuming (to walk the building daily), and it means I can't always get my work done--but the teacher's work is really my work." One principal pointed out that al-

though it was important to be "visible and accessible to teachers without them having to come to my office", their right to privacy was also important. "I do not visit the teacher's lounge because that is their territory where they need to feel free to speak their minds openly."

Some specific things mentioned as ways of increasing the principal's visibility and accessibility included the following:

"We just had the other school's kindergarten over this week. I was in charge of passing out ice cream. I put my arm around each kid and introduced them to everyone else."

"I started eating lunch with the kids, so I could be with them in a nonthreatening way. Four or five kids could come to my office to eat lunch and we'd take pictures of us together. I've had lunch with them all--in fact, we had the last bunch in today."

"I try to get around the building three or four times a day. I'm in the hall between 7:30 and 8:15 so people can see me. I greet the buses and cars when they arrive."

"We had several kids who had some problems early in the year, but I talked to them, visited them in their classrooms, greeted them when they were dropped off in the morning, and things have worked out."

V. THE SCHOOL'S EXPECTATIONS SHOULD BE CLEAR TO EVERYONE, AND THEY SHOULD BE ENFORCED BEGINNING ON THE FIRST DAY.

This theme was perhaps summarized best by the principal who stated, "Be sure the community is well-informed. My motto is "NO SURPRISES." Several principals stressed the importance of expectations concerning school discipline. Some things the principals did to make sure everyone had the same expectations included the following:

"We have a code of honor posted in every classroom in this building."

"During a three-day workshop we went over everything required by the District."

"I had a handbook for parents that was quite complete and that helped a lot."

"I expected teachers to be at their doors greeting children and ready to go on the first day of school. And by 8:30 we had started class right on schedule."

VI. SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPALS ACTIVELY SEEK OUT AND UTILIZE INPUT FROM TEACHERS AND PARENTS.

In describing his views on leadership, one principal remarked that "If you don't involve people in your activities you're not a leader." This was a view to which most of the interviewees seemed to subscribe. Many of the activities they talked about as contributing to their success involved the elicitation and utilization of input from parents and teachers. As one principal put it, "I have found that if you throw out problems to teachers, suddenly you have a resource that won't quit. Teachers have good suggestions, and then I don't have to know it all."

However, another principal pointed out that "there are times when you can get together as a group to make decisions, and other times when you have to say this is where it is." Other comments included:

> "We had a committee which wrote our discipline plan. Rough drafts went to the grade-level teams and we incorporated their feedback. We went through several additional refining stages as well."
>
> "In January of this year we did a written evaluation of where we were and where we were going. We'll do the same thing at the end of the year. The same questionnaire will go to the parents. We'll do a group session with the teachers to set goals and priorities, while the PTA executive committee and team leaders will process the information from the home survey."
>
> "We did a report card on the school which we sent home with the kids. Students and parents rated the school in terms of both curriculum and social/behavioral characteristics."

Summary

One problem with this study, in terms of design and interpretability, is that it is unclear to what extent ALL principals might do these activities within their school and community. Although these five principals are considered to be especially effective by their supervisors, it is not clear from this study which specific behaviors they exhibit that are most responsible for that effectiveness. Perhaps only one or two of the major activities they mentioned are crucial. Nevertheless, their suggestions do have a certain face validity.

It seems that the major themes and practices discussed by these five principals are ultimately the same things which would enhance the functioning of most schools, whether or not they were dealing with the first year of court-ordered desegregation. In fact, several of the principals were quite explicit about this. When asked how their jobs had changed this year, one said that, despite some changes, "Instruction is basically the same--school is school;" while another said, "My job really hasn't changed that much--parents are parents and whether they're new to the school or not, they all want good instruction for their kids."

Nevertheless, during times of stress of change, effective leadership strategies may be especially important in maintaining the quality of instruction. A list of some specific behaviors that principals can try should be useful to all educational administrators.

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